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ABSTRACT

Described is the parent education component of a St. Louis, Missouri, program for the severely handicapped (5-21 years old) which focused on instruction in behavior modification skills. Noted are the organization of the first program of 10 weekly sessions, a continuation program for parents who completed the first program, the "hard to reach" parent, home visits, institution contact, use of parents as volunteers, and a materials workshop for parents. Positive parent evaluations are quoted. (DB)

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Training Parents as Members of the Educational Team

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Summary of Program Presented
at
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by
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In the 1974-75 school year, the Department for the Severely Handicapped, Special School District of St. Louis County, instituted an educational program operating on behavior management principles. The program serviced approximately 600 multiply handicapped mentally retarded students, 5-21 years old, housed in six schools. Many youngsters were attending school for the first time under a zero reject legal mandate. By using a systems approach to learning involving the collection and graphing of behavioral data, the Department sought to take each child at his functional level and help him reach his potential. Emphasis was placed on individual training in several areas such as language, motor, and self-help. The learning of pre-vocational skills was stressed. Geared toward the concept of "normalization", the teaching of life skills was an integral part of the program. Since the major portion of a child's day is spent at home, communicating with parents, sharing teaching techniques, and involving them in the education of their children seemed mandatory in providing the consistency needed to achieve maximum student progress. Therefore, a Parent Training program was developed early in the school year, and a fall and spring course based on behavior management principles was offered.

Organization of the First Program

Prior to the first course, letters were sent to all parents whose children were enrolled in the Department for the Severely Handicapped explaining the purpose of the program and inviting their participation. Several classes were organized based on the responses to the letters. Class size was not limited. The program consisted of ten weekly sessions, 1½ to 2 hours long. A manual was prepared for the course and pre-tests and post-test were given. Parents evaluated the program during the sessions and at the conclusion of the program.

Following a general orientation to the Department, the format for most sessions included: information on the general principles of behavior management techniques, progress reports on the individual home training programs, an introduction and explanation of new materials, a quiz or problem solving period, and a homework assignment. Either films, slides, video tapes, demonstrations, role playing or observations in the classrooms were a part of each lesson. During these sessions, at least one

personal project was attempted by each parent. Along with choosing and implementing programs to solve problem behaviors or to teach new skills, an important part of each session was reserved for the parents to share their experiences and needs.

The content presented at the sessions generally followed the competencies listed in the Parent Training Manual. Upon course completion, the parents who achieved program objectives would be able to:

1. describe behavior in observable, measurable terms
2. count behaviors
3. record and graph behavioral data
4. use various schedules and types of reinforcement
5. strengthen appropriate behaviors
6. weaken inappropriate behaviors
7. maintain desirable behaviors
8. analyze a task
9. employ shaping and fading techniques
10. plan and implement a program based on the principles of reinforcement

Gaining a more positive attitude toward their children and a closer communication with the school were minimum course objectives.

Organization of the Second Program

At the conclusion of the first set of parent programs, several parents indicated their intentions of enrolling in the second course. They claimed that attending weekly sessions provided not only the reinforcement needed to continue working with their child at home, but also more time for "mental digestion" and supervised application of techniques. Therefore, the spring program had two major areas of concentration: one was the continuation courses, and the other concerned the improvement and expansion of parent training services.

This phase stressed:

1. motivating regular attendance
2. reaching the "hard-to-reach" parent
3. innovating new approaches to meeting individual and group needs
4. expanding communication with the community
5. providing extended staff services through volunteer programs

Continuation Program

The continuation program was a series of eight weekly sessions between 1½ and 2 hours long. Since large class size decreased individual instruction, enrollment was limited to twelve people. To reinforce interested parents, a contract was designed involving parents, teachers and the parent trainer. By signing the contract, parents guaranteed standards of attendance at meetings and consistent homework time with their children; teachers provided appropriate programs, and the parent trainer taught techniques to implement the programs at home.

Since the parents in the continuation classes were familiar with behavior management techniques, the main emphasis of the sessions consisted of aiding them in implementing programs for their children. Visits to classrooms, demonstrations in the parent training room, role playing, and video taped techniques along with slides and films were used to help parents gain proficiency in teaching their own child. The programs used by the parents came from homerooms, language, motor, personal hygiene or self-help skill areas. They included skills such as:

turning head in the direction of a sound

grasping an object

washing hands

responding appropriately to the words same and different

identifying coins

saying noun words when shown object or picture

eliminating hitting behavior

complying with parent requests

Parents gained expertise in designing their own behavior management programs and teaching skills one step at a time using positive reirforcement principles. Parents also took data and graphed progress. Sharing their results with the teacher could lead to adjustments in program or techniques either at school or at home. Several programs were completed and new ones started.

Reaching the "Hard-to-Reach" Parent

One class was planned for parents who had not indicated intentions of enrolling in the Parent Program. Teachers recommended parent contact based on childrens' needs either in behavior management or skill development areas. Consistent contact was necessary to promote and maintain attendance. Class sessions involved direct and immediate involvement with their children in a learning situation. Behavioral theory was presented only when it related to their specific needs and could be practically used. These parents needed services in addition to the parent class including individual conferences, home visits or community referrals.

Individual Conferences

Individual conferences were initiated either by the teacher or by the parent. At a meeting, the parent, teacher, parent trainer, and when needed, the school nurse, would concur on an intervention for behavior control. Close contact was maintained with the parent, either in class sessions, by telephone or through a home visit, to reinforce or augment the prescribed procedures. In this manner behavior problems were reduced or eliminated both at school and at home.

Home Visits

With the limited enrollment, it became possible to see and service individual needs through home visits and a support system of telephone calls. Though this

strategy was initiated with the teacher to provide for the generalization of behavior management techniques and toileting skills to the home, several of the home visits also revealed other parent and family needs that required community services.

Institution Contact

Because of the deviant behavior of many of our students from a state institution, a major effort was made to promote communication with the staff there. One educational director assigned attendants to participate in a special late afternoon class at the childrens' school. The attendants had direct contact with teachers, observed in classrooms and helped design programs to foster behavior change both at school and in their residences. Appropriate talking patterns, improved social behavior and acceptable bus conduct were some of the behavior changes in students that seem to relate to the consistency in implementing the programs.

Community Contacts

A majority of parents in the Program said that at one time they had been advised to institutionalize their child. They expressed concern that professionals in health services were not aware of other community options. At their request, a letter was sent inviting pediatricians and neurologists to observe their patients in a school setting and gain an overview of this program for the Severely Handicapped.

Volunteers

A pilot volunteer program was started involving parents who had attended the first parent program and high school students from community services classes. The volunteer program called for a three-phase training period involving a theoretical and practical orientation to our program and an individual practicum before class placement. Through readings, slides, films, video tapes, observation, demonstrations and practice, the volunteers developed teaching techniques necessary to implement classroom programs and supplement the school staff.

Field Trips

Since parents revealed a lack of knowledge of community services for special children, field trips were planned to accommodate specific needs. Parents visited several facilities including respite homes and workshops to gain a concept of the continuum of services that might be available to their children. Through the field trips they became more aware of the importance of emphasizing independent living skills in home training situations.

Materials Workshops

In response to parent complaints that their children were idle much of the day and that appropriate toys are both difficult to find and costly to purchase, a materials workshop was held. Parents were shown how to utilize no-cost household items to make instructional games and activities developmentally appropriate for their child. Slides of teacher-made materials were viewed, and all the supplies needed to make a teaching tool were made available.

Parent Evaluations

Parents were asked to write an informal assessment of the second set of parent programs. Returns indicated that all parents had positive feelings about their participation in training classes. Typical comments were:

> "I learned about behavior modification and how to encourage my child by praising him. I came to the realization that what we were taking for granted as easy and automatic for us, is, instead a complicated and many 'step' advancement for Brad."
>
> "The parent program is valuable because it gives a parent hope that her childrens' behavior can be improved and skills strengthened."
>
> "I have a new attitude toward getting them to do the things I want them to do and feel that I have a tool to use now while before I felt somewhat helpless."
>
> "I now have a much better idea on how important it is to continue at home on what is being taught at school."
>
> "I found he is capable of doing much more than I thought...All I can say for the program is that I am sorry it is not compulsory for all mothers (fathers and families, too) that have a child in special school."

"Perhaps of even greater value is the attitude I have developed toward our other children...I guess my only wish is that this type of education would have been more prevalent twelve years ago when Mike first started school."